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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on the standards and test schools used to measure student and school performance in Texas. The primary method for evaluating the academic achievement of Texas public school students is a standardized test called the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). A review of TAAS scores and their uses suggests that the TAAS test may be given too much weight in the Texas educational system for evaluating students and schools. The TAAS is used not only for student assessment and school evaluation, but is also used to decide if students are ready to graduate. Although an increasing number of students are passing the TAAS, there is still substantial need for improvement. Fair learning standards should be based on a realistic assessment of the skills and knowledge that a student will need in college or the workplace. All children should have similar learning opportunities. High standards are the beginning, but students also need the belief that they have the ability to succeed. The Ysleta Independent School District, El Paso, Texas, demonstrates the success possible when the vision of the school district makes academic success nonnegotiable. Ysleta students are passing the TAAS at higher rates than in any other large urban district in the state. (Contains 2 figures, 4 tables, and 23 endnotes.) (SLD)

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# MEASURING UP

## The State of Texas Education

A Special Report of the Texas Kids Count Project

# STUDENT ASSESSMENT AND PERFORMANCE

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**Texas Kids Count Project**

November 1998

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# MEASURING UP
## The State of Texas Education

A SPECIAL REPORT OF THE TEXAS KIDS COUNT PROJECT

## STUDENT ASSESSMENT AND PERFORMANCE

There are many environmental and social factors that can affect how well students perform in school. Class size, teacher training, or whether the parents are involved in the child's education can impact how well students will perform. Further, whether a child went to preschool, if he/she is hungry or has other health or personal problems will also affect student achievement. Many of these factors are addressed in other reports in this series on education (see the *Measuring Up* report entitled *Overview of Education in Texas* for more discussion). This report will focus on the standards and tests schools used to measure student and school performance.

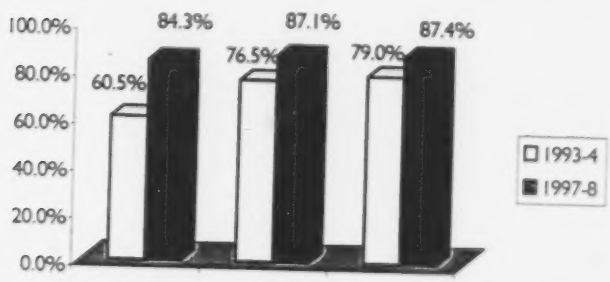
The primary method for evaluating the academic achievement of students in Texas public schools is a standardized test called the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Although the TAAS test was originally designed to measure individual student's achievement, in recent years the results of the tests have also been used to evaluate groups of students as well as schools and school districts. TAAS results are also used to determine whether students should be allowed to graduate.

### Student Performance

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) measures how well Texas students are faring academically in basic subjects such as math, reading, and writing. TAAS tests are administered to grades 3 through 8 and the 10th grade. More students in Texas are passing the TAAS tests than ever before. The percent of all students who passed the TAAS test increased by 39 percent for math, 14 percent for reading, and 11 percent for writing between 1994 and 1998. The greatest improvements have been seen in the math test scores, with African American students showing the largest gains in math (from 55% in 1996 to 64% just one year later).

In general, approximately 70 percent of items on the test must be answered correctly to pass. However, test difficulty can vary and when more difficult items are on a test, the percent that must be answered correctly is adjusted. Students who answer approximately 95 percent of all questions correctly receive 'academic recognition'.[1]

**Percent of Texas Students Passing All TAAS tests**




1998 percents are preliminary and do not include year-round schools

While TAAS scores are improving statewide, many children are still not passing the tests and far more students are not mastering the subjects tested. Only about two-thirds of all economically disadvantaged students passed the TAAS tests taken in 1997 (60.2%) compared to 85 percent for white students and 73.2 percent of all students.[2] Almost half (48%) of Texas students are considered economically disadvantaged (living at or below 185% of the poverty line, or less than $24,605 for a family of four).



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In general, minority students do not perform as well on the TAAS as white students.[3] The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has asserted that the TAAS test is biased because of the disproportionate number of minority groups who fail the test.[4] The U.S. Department of Education conducted a review of the TAAS and found that there were insufficient mechanisms in the test creation and administration process to ensure that bias does not occur, although the review board stopped short of saying the test itself was discriminatory.[5]

A study by the Charles A. Dana Center and the STAR Center of the University of Texas found that not all schools with large minority and low-income populations are doing poorly on the TAAS test. The study, released in 1997, identified more than 50 schools in Texas where there was a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students (over 60%) but at least 70 percent of all students passed the reading and math sections of the TAAS.[6] The study identified seven themes to describe the characteristics of these successful schools:

1. There is a focus on the academic success of every student.
2. There are no excuses for low performance.
3. Experimentation is encouraged.
4. Everyone is part of the solution.
5. Students, parents, and all school personnel have a sense of 'family'.
6. The school 'family' works together in collaboration and trust.
7. All participants believe that improvement is possible.[7]

A case study of one school district that has succeeded in improving the quality of education and the performance of its students against great odds is given on page 5.

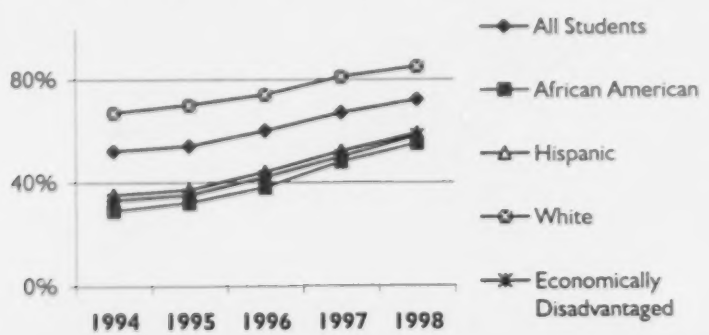
## Other Uses of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)

**Graduation Eligibility.** In addition to assessing individual student's achievement, the TAAS test is used to determine students' eligibility for graduation. The test given in the 10th grade is also the exit test for high school and students failing to pass the exit-level test are not eligible to receive a Texas high school diploma.[8] Students are given several opportunities to re-take this exit exam. The percent of students passing the 10th grade TAAS test for each county is given on the last page of this report.

The percentage of 10th graders passing all tests has risen from 52 percent in 1994 to 72 percent in 1998. While three-fourths of all students taking the 10th grade TAAS test pass, the percent passing in counties across Texas ranges from only 43 to 100 percent.[9] The following chart shows the rates of students passing all TAAS tests in the 10th grade. White students are clearly passing at higher rates than other ethnic groups.

| Percent Passing TAAS, 10th grade | 1994 | 1998 |
|---|---|---|
| All tests taken | 52 | 72 |
| Reading | 76 | 88 |
| Writing | 81 | 89 |
| Math | 57 | 78 |
| African American, all tests | 29 | 55 |
| Hispanic, all tests | 35 | 59 |
| White, all tests | 67 | 85 |
| Economically Disadvantaged, all tests | 33 | 58 |

**Percent Passing All Tests, 10th Grade**



**Assessing School Performance.** In addition to measuring how well students are doing and whether a student can graduate from high school, TAAS results are used to assess how well schools are performing. Schools are evaluated based on the percentage of students passing the TAAS test, the dropout rate, and the attendance rate.[10] Schools can be rated as exemplary, recognized, acceptable, and unacceptable (low performing).

Unlike most other states, Texas schools' ratings are based not only on the aggregate performance of students, but also on the performance of individual groups of students – in particular, African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged students.[11] Schools must demonstrate levels of performance for the general population of students, but also for each of these four groups as well. According to a University of Texas study of achievement in Texas schools "...disparities among groups of students are not masked by a singular focus on the school average. Attention must be given to ensuring that all groups of students achieve high levels of academic success."[12] Used correctly, this system can to lead to the improvement of all groups of students because special efforts are made to improve each student's performance.

The following table shows the number of Texas school campuses receiving ratings of exemplary, recognized, acceptable, and low performing over the last four years. Note that according to current definition, a school is considered acceptable even when more than half the students (up to 60%) fail the TAAS.

To see reports on the ratings of individual schools, visit the Texas Education Agency website: (http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/97/campus.srch.html)

**Texas School Ratings** (number of schools)

| Campus Rating | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Exemplary (90% passing*) | 255 | 394 | 683 | 1,048 |
| Recognized (80% passing) | 1,004 | 1,309 | 1,617 | 1,666 |
| Acceptable (40% passing**) | 4,347 | 4,127 | 3,679 | 3,365 |
| Low Performing (<40% passing) | 267 | 108 | 67 | 59 |
| Not Rated | 347 | 420 | 467 | 526 |
| **Total** | **6,220** | **6,358** | **6,513** | **6,664** |

* Minimum passing rate on TAAS is given. Dropout rate and attendance rates also considered.

** Passing rates for acceptable performance will be raised to 45 percent in 1999 and 50 percent in 2000.[13]

Students who are in special education or who have limited English proficiency have traditionally been exempted from taking the TAAS. These exempted students have not been included in school's accountability ratings, prompting critics to say the test is not a true measure of learning.[14] New legislation enacted by the 75th legislature requires that special education students be assessed using an alternative test in order to reduce the number of exemptions. The scores from students taking the alternative test will be included in the accountability ratings starting in the year 2002.[15] A Spanish version of the TAAS for grades 3 through 6 will be included in the accountability ratings beginning in 2001.[16]

A disadvantage of using a standards-based testing system to evaluate students and schools is that some schools may 'teach to the test'. While the concept of teaching those skills necessary to pass the TAAS test is not a bad strategy in and of itself, the temptation exists for schools to focus on teaching only those subjects and tasks that are on the test. Instead, schools should provide a comprehensive curriculum that is geared toward ensuring that children are learning a variety of necessary subjects. Students who are achieving high scores on standardized tests, should also be performing well in other equally important subjects such as history, geography, science, or art.[17]

## Standards of Education

Our public schools are charged with the job of preparing students for college and/or the work place. The academic standards to which schools and students are held and the methods by which student and school performance is evaluated are the subjects of great debate. Ideally, students should be evaluated using culturally and developmentally appropriate instruments that are based on standards and objectives of academic achievement. Each child should receive an education that will prepare him or her for a successful life and standards and tests should measure whether each child is receiving that education.

Standards are simply a set of guidelines and goals that educators should follow in developing their curricula. Standards should be appropriate and rigorous and students and teachers should be held accountable to those standards. The State Board of Education adopted new standards for education called Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)

on September 1, 1998. Draft versions of these new standards were evaluated as part of a national study of states' standards and assessments to determine whether they are "rigorous, clear, and specific enough to form a core curriculum".[18] Texas received fairly good grades for its standards of education.

| Texas' Report Card | | |
|---|---|---|
| Standards and assessments | 1998 | A- |
| Rigor of math standards | 1997 | B |
| Clarity of math standards | 1996 | B |
| Rigor of English standards | 1997 | B- |
| Clarity of English standards | 1996 | C |

Quality Counts '98 The State of the States[19]

The questions on the TAAS test have not yet been fully adapted to the new TEKS standards of education. The fine-tuning of the TAAS test is expected to be completed in the Spring of 2000.[20] As the tests are adjusted to measure academic achievement according to these new standards, student's scores could go down unless teachers are able to help bring the students up to these new levels of performance expectations.

Texas has made remarkable gains in student achievement in recent years. According to a study by the National Education Goals panel, factors leading to these gains include:

- Establishing clear teaching objectives by grade through statewide learning standards
- Implementing new, statewide assessments closely linked to the learning standards
- Emphasizing strongly that all students were expected to meet the standards
- Establishing a system of accountability with both sanctions and rewards linked to the assessment results
- Explicit shifting of resources to schools with more disadvantaged students[21]

Although Texas has adopted a set of student assessment standards that are more challenging, comprehensive and deliberate efforts must be undertaken to ensure that these more challenging standards are taught in all classrooms around the state. Tough standards could increase the achievement gap between schools if some schools make an effort to meet them, while others do not. All Texas educators must see the relevance of these standards to their teaching and incorporate then into their curricula.

## Conclusion

The TAAS test may be given too much weight in our system for evaluating students and schools. The TAAS test is used not only for student assessment and school evaluation, but is also used to decide if students are ready to graduate. A proposal put forward by the Governor's office in 1997 would require that third, fifth, and eighth graders pass the TAAS test before they can be promoted to the next grade. According to this proposal, students who fail portions of the test would have to attend summer school at state expense and re-take the test before being promoted to the next grade. This plan could discourage social promotion, a practice that promotes children to the next grade even when they have not yet mastered the material from the previous grade. However, others argue that the TAAS test is not proven to measure the academic proficiency of young students and could cause large numbers of students to have to attend summer school unnecessarily.[22]

Although an increasing number of Texas students are passing the TAAS test, there is still substantial need for improvement. Fair learning standards should be based on a realistic assessment of the skills and knowledge that a student will need in college or the workplace. Even though most public schools are focused on academic standards, research shows that many employers and college professors believe that a high school diploma is still no guarantee that a student has learned the basic skills.[23] All students must be given a fair chance to acquire the skills they need to continue learning throughout their lifetimes.

All children should have similar learning opportunities, regardless of their economic status. The successful education of all children, regardless of economic status, will take a commitment on the part of the larger community. High standards in curriculum, teaching, and assessment are just the beginning. More importantly, children must have the belief that they have the ability to succeed. Everyone in the community including parents, teachers, and business partners must share in that belief.

## A SUCCESS STORY: YSLETA SCHOOL DISTRICT

Ysleta Independent School District (YISD) is among the state's 10 largest school districts and the second largest school district in El Paso, Texas. During the 1996-97 school year the district served 47,366 students on 56 school campuses. Recently the district has received positive attention for its efforts to improve the quality of education and the performance of its students.

**Background.** The majority of students in the YISD are Hispanic (85.4%). White students comprise 11.1 percent, African Americans 2.6 percent, and other ethnic groups make up 0.9 percent of the school population. Ysleta is one of the state's poorest districts. Two-thirds of all students in the district are considered economically disadvantaged (68.1%).

In 1993, seven schools in the Ysleta district were classified as 'low-performing.' A process to improve the schools in the district was initiated and the School Board decided that all schools would try to be 'exemplary' or 'recognized' by the year 2000. There has been steady progress toward that goal since. Since 1993 the number of schools that were rated acceptable has dropped from 48 to 7, but the number rated exemplary or recognized has gone from 1 to 44.

| Campus Ratings | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Exemplary | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 11 |
| Recognized | 1 | 8 | 15 | 22 | 33 |
| Acceptable | 48 | 41 | 36 | 27 | 7 |
| Low Performing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

**Ysleta's Vision.** The district's vision statement makes academic success non-negotiable: All students will graduate from high school fully bilingual and prepared to enter a four-year college or university. Luis Villalobos, Director of Public Relations for the school district commented that despite the fact that Ysleta has many of the risk factors that lead to low-performing schools (including high poverty rates and large minority populations), there is the belief among all employees "...that all children in Ysleta schools will succeed."

To help each school meet the district's goals, site-based decisionmaking is practiced. This empowers each school to make the changes they see as necessary to have a better functioning school. Not only are districts given the authority to make decisions, but the resources to implement them as well. To further help facilitate the improvement of each school, the superintendent implemented an open-enrollment program. School district personnel believe that by allowing students and families a choice of which school they want to attend, schools became more competitive.

Parental and community involvement are contributing factors to the success of the Ysleta district. In 1991, Ysleta was the first in the state to implement a tuition free summer school program with mandatory parental involvement. Because of the program's success, the state has funded similar efforts in other districts. Other programs that involve parents include family tutoring in mathematics, parenting classes, teaching parents computer and job skills, and a parent's basketball and soccer league.

Ysleta school district has been aggressive in acquiring and using technology in the classrooms. In fact, the district exceeded the state's average of one computer for every four students with one computer for every three students. Ysleta used grants and donations to meet the need for technology.

**Results.** Through the hard work and dedication of students, parents, school staff, and the community as a whole, Ysleta students are passing the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) at higher rates than any other large urban district in the state. The creative efforts of the school district have resulted in improvements in all the schools, making Ysleta among the best in the state.

**Sources:**

*Snapshot '94, 1993-94 School District Profiles* Texas Education Agency.
*Snapshot '97, 1996-97 School District Profiles* Texas Education Agency.
Interview with Luis Villalobos. Director of Public Relations 11/10-98.
*School Performance Review. Ysleta Independent School District*. A report from the Texas Performance Review. John Sharp Comptroller of Public Accounts. April 1998.

**Percent Passing TAAS Grade 10, Spring 1998**

| County | Percent | County | Percent | County | Percent | County | Percent | County | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anderson | 72 | Crane | 80 | Hartley | 78 | Madison | 59 | San Patricio | 74 |
| Andrews | 69 | Crockett | 84 | Haskell | 82 | Marion | 77 | San Saba | 70 |
| Angelina | 69 | Crosby | 68 | Hays | 73 | Martin | 60 | Schleicher | 90 |
| Aransas | 75 | Culberson | 62 | Hemphill | 73 | Mason | 85 | Scurry | 77 |
| Archer | 87 | Dallam | 83 | Henderson | 72 | Matagorda | 79 | Shackelford | 97 |
| Armstrong | 82 | Dallas | 70 | Hidalgo | 64 | Maverick | 62 | Shelby | 71 |
| Atascosa | 66 | Dawson | 71 | Hill | 65 | McCulloch | 84 | Sherman | 89 |
| Austin | 74 | Deaf Smith | 71 | Hockley | 71 | McLennan | 72 | Smith | 73 |
| Bailey | 78 | Delta | 76 | Hood | 78 | McMullen | 83 | Somervell | 85 |
| Bandera | 84 | Denton | 84 | Hopkins | 78 | Medina | 75 | Starr | 57 |
| Bastrop | 72 | Dewitt | 81 | Houston | 70 | Menard | 83 | Stephens | 77 |
| Baylor | 95 | Dickens | 91 | Howard | 79 | Midland | 72 | Sterling | 89 |
| Bee | 62 | Dimmit | 50 | Hudspeth | 56 | Milam | 78 | Stonewall | 79 |
| Bell | 72 | Donley | 77 | Hunt | 72 | Mills | 76 | Sutton | 66 |
| Bexar | 67 | Duval | 66 | Hutchinson | 77 | Mitchell | 65 | Swisher | 78 |
| Blanco | 81 | Eastland | 84 | Irion | 82 | Montague | 77 | Tarrant | 73 |
| Borden | 91 | Ector | 67 | Jack | 83 | Montgomery | 77 | Taylor | 72 |
| Bosque | 80 | Edwards | 72 | Jackson | 80 | Moore | 69 | Terrell | 100 |
| Bowie | 76 | Ellis | 80 | Jasper | 63 | Morris | 86 | Terry | 66 |
| Brazoria | 83 | El Paso | 62 | Jeff Davis | 76 | Motley | 87 | Throckmorton | 89 |
| Brazos | 75 | Erath | 83 | Jefferson | 64 | Nacogdoches | 82 | Titus | 74 |
| Brewster | 70 | Falls | 69 | Jim Hogg | 69 | Navarro | 78 | Tom Green | 74 |
| Briscoe | 100 | Fannin | 74 | Jim Wells | 69 | Newton | 75 | Travis | 72 |
| Brooks | 50 | Fayette | 81 | Johnson | 77 | Nolan | 75 | Trinity | 68 |
| Brown | 76 | Fisher | 82 | Jones | 79 | Nueces | 73 | Tyler | 73 |
| Burleson | 75 | Floyd | 72 | Karnes | 84 | Ochiltree | 85 | Upshur | 77 |
| Burnet | 82 | Foard | 80 | Kaufman | 79 | Oldham | 76 | Upton | 68 |
| Caldwell | 66 | Fort Bend | 77 | Kendall | 84 | Orange | 77 | Uvalde | 79 |
| Calhoun | 75 | Franklin | 90 | Kenedy | N/A | Palo Pinto | 74 | Val Verde | 55 |
| Callahan | 80 | Freestone | 73 | Kent | 83 | Panola | 71 | Van Zandt | 84 |
| Cameron | 72 | Frio | 62 | Kerr | 76 | Parker | 77 | Victoria | 68 |
| Camp | 80 | Gaines | 72 | Kimble | 74 | Parmer | 87 | Walker | 68 |
| Carson | 89 | Galveston | 76 | King | 100 | Pecos | 68 | Waller | 67 |
| Cass | 83 | Garza | 66 | Kinney | 81 | Polk | 74 | Ward | 78 |
| Castro | 64 | Gillespie | 92 | Kleberg | 64 | Potter | 71 | Washington | 76 |
| Chambers | 78 | Glasscock | 82 | Knox | 86 | Presidio | 64 | Webb | 60 |
| Cherokee | 68 | Goliad | 79 | Lamar | 83 | Rains | 78 | Wharton | 81 |
| Childress | 75 | Gonzales | 70 | Lamb | 76 | Randall | 82 | Wheeler | 92 |
| Clay | 86 | Gray | 74 | Lampasas | 81 | Reagan | 80 | Wichita | 80 |
| Cochran | 65 | Grayson | 81 | La Salle | 43 | Real | 65 | Wilbarger | 81 |
| Coke | 81 | Gregg | 78 | Lavaca | 86 | Red River | 73 | Willacy | 71 |
| Colman | 78 | Grimes | 71 | Lee | 69 | Reeves | 61 | Williamson | 83 |
| Collin | 85 | Guadalupe | 69 | Leon | 76 | Refugio | 68 | Wilson | 73 |
| Collingsworth | 83 | Hale | 70 | Liberty | 71 | Roberts | 100 | Winkler | 69 |
| Colorado | 74 | Hall | 83 | Limestone | 72 | Robertson | 61 | Wise | 82 |
| Comal | 76 | Hamilton | 88 | Lipscome | 91 | Rockwall | 79 | Wood | 79 |
| Comanche | 81 | Hansford | 90 | Live Oak | 75 | Runnels | 71 | Yoakum | 78 |
| Concho | 79 | Hardeman | 80 | Llano | 80 | Rusk | 72 | Young | 82 |
| Cooke | 73 | Hardin | 72 | Loving | N/A | Sabine | 80 | Zapata | 68 |
| Coryell | 76 | Harris | 71 | Lubbock | 72 | San Augustine | 70 | Zavala | 57 |
| Cottle | 84 | Harrison | 69 | Lynn | 84 | San Jacinto | 73 | **Texas** | **72** |

Source: Texas Education Agency



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## Endnotes

[1] "House Research Organization." Texas House of Representatives. September 29, 1998.
[2] *Snapshot '97, 1996-97 School District Profiles* Texas Education Agency, p.12.
[3] Ibid.
[4] "House Research Organization." Texas House of Representatives. September 29, 1998.
[5] Ibid.
[6] *Successful Texas Schoolwide Programs*. The Charles A. Dana Center and The STAR Center. Feb 1997
[7] ibid.
[8] *Snapshot '97, 1996-97 School District Profiles* Texas Education Agency.
[9] County percentages calculated by aggregating data provided by Texas Education Agency for school districts.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Narrowing the Achievement Gap in Texas. Unpublished report by Joseph F. Johnson, Charles A. Dana Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
[12] Ibid.
[13] "House Research Organization." Texas House of Representatives. September 29, 1998.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Dougherty, C. (1997). *Improving your Child's Education*. San Antonio, TX: Omni Publishers
[18] *Quality Counts '98* http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc98/states/tables/tx-t.htm
[19] Ibid.
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[21] *Exploring Rapid Achievement Gains in North Carolina and Texas*. National Education Goals Panel, November 1998.
[22] "House Research Organization." Texas House of Representatives. September 29, 1998.
[23] *Quality Counts '98* The Public Agenda, New York, New York, Jan. 1998.